

rhythmical, speech, which is probably nearer to the pattern of Greek dramatic verse than the more formal rhetoric of our older classic drama. It is this development in modern drama that has made possible the type of diction at which I have aimed in the versions here offered to new generations of readers and actors.

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*The text followed is mainly that of Jebb
(Cambridge; O.T. 1893, O.C. 1889, Ant. 1891).*

THE THEBAN LEGEND

The place called Thebes lay in the central plain of Boeotia, part of the narrow tongue of land joining the Athenian country to the more northerly mainland. Here, under the guidance of the oracle of Delphi, a city was first founded by Cadmus, son of Agenor and brother of that Europa whom Zeus courted in the likeness of a bull. Misfortune befell him even before his city was established, for all the trusty companions who should have been his first citizens were devoured by a fierce dragon which inhabited a neighbouring glen. But Cadmus was a match for the dragon and at one stroke laid him dead. Again the word of Heaven guided him, and he was instructed to sow the dragon's teeth in the ground prepared for his future city; from which seed there instantly sprang up a tribe of giants so fierce and fully armed that a deadly combat immediately broke out between them. At length but five remained alive, and these offering their submission to Cadmus became the founders and fathers of the Thebes to be.

Cadmus begat Polydorus, and Polydorus begat Labdacus, and Labdacus begat Laius; and to Laius and his wife Jocasta a son was born. Before even a name had been given to this infant – indeed, by some accounts, before he was born – his life was clouded with the presage of disaster; for Apollo's oracle had nothing but ill to foretell of him: he was destined one day to kill his father, and to become his own mother's husband. Could any mortal device be proof against the god's prediction? Could any mortal be so presumptuous as to try to thwart it? Laius and Jocasta would so presume. One way alone offered any hope – more than hope, certainty. The child should not live. They would not indeed take upon themselves the guilt of infanticide, but they would deliver the child to a servant of theirs, a shepherd, with orders to abandon it on the mountain-side, its feet cruelly pierced with an iron pin, so that it might not even crawl to safety.

This was done. But still the word of Apollo – and human compassion – prevailed. For the shepherd had not the heart to leave the child to perish; instead he entrusted it to a fellow-labourer, a Corinthian

shepherd, beseeching him to take it away beyond the borders of Thebes and rear it as his own. The Corinthian, a servant of Polybus, King of Corinth, in due course brought the child to his royal master, who, being childless, gladly welcomed the infant and adopted it as his own, giving it the name of Oedipus (Swollen-foot) in commiseration for its painful treatment.

Oedipus grew to manhood, the honoured Prince of Corinth and loved foster-son of those whom he supposed to be his true parents. But by chance he came to hear, again from the mouth of Apollo's ministers, the terrible prediction concerning him. Again, as his parents had done, he sought to give the lie to the oracle. He fled from Corinth, resolved never again to set eyes on his supposed father and mother as long as they lived. His wanderings brought him to Thebes, where now all was calamity and confusion. King Laius had been killed by an unknown traveller on a lonely road; the city was in the grip of a deadly monster, the Sphinx, who pitted her ferocity against the wits of man, destroying all who failed to answer her cunning riddle: and none could answer it. But in Oedipus the creature met her match. He answered her riddle and destroyed her power, and so was received joyfully into Thebes as her king and heir to the house and fortune; a happy man, a wise and resourceful man, and (save for one sharp encounter on his journey from Corinth to Thebes) a man of peace. He married Jocasta; and sons and daughters were born to them.

There passed some fifteen years of seeming prosperity. But beneath the deceptive surface a hideous depth of shame and infamy lay concealed. The gods could no longer brook in silence the affront of Oedipus's unwitting sins. Pestilence and famine brought Thebes once more to the verge of utter extinction. In their despair her citizens cried to their king for yet more proofs of his infallible resource, and to their gods, chief among them Apollo, for light and healing in their wretchedness.

[Here the play of KING OEDIPUS begins]

KING OEDIPUS

★

CHARACTERS

Oedipus, King of Thebes
Jocasta, wife of Oedipus
Creon, brother of Jocasta
Teiresias, a blind prophet
A Priest
A Messenger
A Shepherd
An Attendant
Chorus of Theban elders
King's attendants
Queen's attendants
Citizens of Thebes

★

Scene: Before the Royal Palace at Thebes.

In front of the King's Palace, upon the steps and around the altars which stand in the forecourt, are grouped numerous citizens of Thebes, sitting in attitudes of supplication.

Enter OEDIPUS from the central door, attended.

OEDIPUS: Children, new blood of Cadmus' ancient line –
What is the meaning of this supplication,
These branches and garlands, the incense filling the city,
These prayers for the healing of pain, these lamentations?
I have not thought it fit to rely on my messengers,
But am here to learn for myself – I, Oedipus,
Whose name is known afar.
(To the PRIEST.) You, reverend sir,
In right of age should speak for all of them.
What is the matter? Some fear? Something you desire?

I would willingly do anything to help you;
Indeed I should be heartless, were I to stop my ears
To a general petition such as this.

PRIEST: My lord and king: we are gathered here, as you see,
Young and old, from the tenderest chicks to the age-bent
seniors;

Priests – I of Zeus – and the pick of our young manhood.
More sit in the market-place, carrying boughs like these,
And around the twin altars of Pallas and the sacred embers
Of divination, beside the river of Ismenus.

You too have seen our city's affliction, caught
In a tide of death from which there is no escaping –
Death in the fruitful flowering of her soil;
Death in the pastures; death in the womb of woman;
And pestilence, a fiery demon gripping the city,
Stripping the house of Cadmus, to fatten hell
With profusion of lamentation.

If we come to you now, sir, as your suppliants,
I and these children, it is not as holding you
The equal of gods, but as the first of men,
Whether in the ordinary business of mortal life,
Or in the encounters of man with more than man.
It was you, we remember, a newcomer to Cadmus' town,
That broke our bondage to the vile Enchantress.
With no foreknowledge or hint that we could give,
But, as we truly believe, with the help of God,
You gave us back our life.

Now, Oedipus great and glorious, we seek
Your help again. Find some deliverance for us
By any way that god or man can show.
We know that experience of trials past gives strength
To present counsel. Therefore, O greatest of men,
Restore our city to life. Have a care for your fame.
Your diligence saved us once; let it not be said
That under your rule we were raised up only to fall.
Save, save our city, and keep her safe for ever.

Under the same bright star that gave us then
Good fortune, guide us into good to-day.
If you are to be our King, as now you are,
Be king of living men, not emptiness.
Surely there is no strength in wall or ship,
Where men are lacking and no life breathes within them.

OEDIPUS:

I grieve for you, my children. Believe me, I know
All that you desire of me, all that you suffer;
And while you suffer, none suffers more than I.
You have your several griefs, each for himself;
But my heart bears the weight of my own, and yours
And all my people's sorrows. I am not asleep.
I weep; and walk through endless ways of thought.

But I have not been idle; one thing I have already done –
The only thing that promised hope. My kinsman
Creon, the son of Menoeceus, has been sent
To the Pythian house of Apollo, to learn what act
Or word of mine could help you. This is the day
I reckoned he should return. It troubles me
That he is not already here. But when he comes,
Whatever the god requires, upon my honour
It shall be done.

PRIEST: Well said.

(He descries someone approaching from a distance.)

And look! They are making signs
That Creon is on his way. Yes. He is here!

OEDIPUS *(looking also)*: And with smiling face! O Apollo!
If his news is good!

PRIEST: It must be good; his head is crowned with bay
Full-berried; that is a sign.

OEDIPUS: We shall soon know ...

He can hear us now ... Royal brother! What news?
What message for us from the mouth of God?

Enter CREON.

CREON: Good news. That is to say that good may come

Even out of painful matters, if all goes well.

OEDIPUS: And the answer? You hold me between fear and hope. The answer?

CREON:

I will tell you – if you wish me to speak in the presence of all.
If not, let us go in.

OEDIPUS: Speak before all.

Their plight concerns me now, more than my life.

CREON:

This, then, is the answer, and this the plain command
Of Phoebus our lord. There is an unclean thing,
Born and nursed on our soil, polluting our soil,
Which must be driven away, not kept to destroy us.

OEDIPUS:

What unclean thing? And what purification is required?

CREON:

The banishment of a man, or the payment of blood for blood.
For the shedding of blood is the cause of our city's peril.

OEDIPUS:

What blood does he mean? Did he say who it was that died?

CREON: We had a king, sir, before you came to lead us.

His name was Laius.

OEDIPUS: I know. I never saw him.

CREON: He was killed. And clearly the meaning of the god's
command

Is that we bring the unknown killer to justice.

OEDIPUS:

And where might *he* be? Where shall we hope to uncover
The faded traces of that far-distant crime?

CREON: Here – the god said. Seek, and ye shall find.

Unsought goes undetected.

OEDIPUS: Was it at home,

Or in the field, or abroad on foreign soil,
That Laius met his death, this violent death?

CREON: He left the country, as he said, on a pilgrimage;
And from that day forth we never saw him again.

OEDIPUS: Was there no word, no fellow-traveller

Who saw what happened, whose evidence could have been
used?

CREON: All died; save one, who fled from the scene in terror,
And had nothing to tell for certain – except one thing.

OEDIPUS:

What was it? One thing might point the way to others,
If once we could lay our hands on the smallest clue.

CREON: His story was that robbers – not one but many –
Fell in with the King's party and put them to death.

OEDIPUS:

Robbers would hardly commit such a daring outrage –
Unless they were paid to do it by someone here.

CREON:

That too was suggested. But in the troubles that followed
No avenger came forward to punish the murderers.

OEDIPUS: What troubles? Surely none great enough to hinder
A full inquiry into a royal death?

CREON:

The Sphinx with her riddles forced us to turn our attention
From insoluble mysteries to more immediate matters.

OEDIPUS:

I will start afresh; and bring everything into the light.

All praise to Phoebus – and thanks, for your part, to you –
For thus pointing out our duty to the dead.

You will find me as willing an ally as you could wish
In the cause of God and our country. My own cause too –
Not merely from a fellow-creature will I clear this taint,
But from myself. The killer of Laius,

Whoever he was, might think to turn his hand
Against *me*; thus, serving Laius, I serve myself.

Now, up from your seats, my children! Away with these
boughs!

Bring all the people of Cadmus here, and tell them

There is nothing I will not do. Certain it is
That by the help of God we stand – or fall.

OEDIPUS goes into the Palace. A Messenger goes to summon the people. The PRIEST dismisses the suppliants.

PRIEST: Up, children. Now the King has promised us
All that we came to ask. Let us pray that Phoebus,
From whom the answer came, himself may come
To save and deliver us out of our heavy afflictions.
The suppliants disperse.

Enter the CHORUS of Theban elders.

CHORUS:

In Thebes, City of Light, from the Pythian House of Gold
The gracious voice of heaven is heard.
With fear my heart is riven, fear of what shall be told.
O Healer of Delos, hear!
Fear is upon us. What wilt thou do?
Things new, or old as the circling year?
Speak to us, Daughter of Golden Hope! Come, deathless
word!

Deathless Athena! First, Daughter of Zeus, on thee
We call; then on thy sister Queen
Artemis, over our city enthroned in her majesty;
And Phoebus, Lord of the Bow;
Show us again your threefold power
This hour, as in ages long ago.
From the fire and pain of pestilence save us and make us
[clean.

Sorrows beyond all telling –
Sickness rife in our ranks, outstripping
Invention of remedy – blight
On barren earth,
And barren agonies of birth –
Life after life from the wild-fire winging
Swiftly into the night.

Beyond all telling, the city
Reeks with the death in her streets, death-bringing.
None weeps, and her children die,

None by to pity.
Mothers at every altar kneel.
Golden Athena, come near to our crying!
Apollo, hear us and heal!

Not with the rattle of bronze, but loud around us
The battle is raging, swift the death-fiend flying.
Fling to the farthest corners of the sea,
Or to some bleak North bay,
The onset of his armoury!
Night's agony grows into tortured day.
Zeus, let thy thunders crush, thy lightning slay!

Slay with thy golden bow, Lycean! Slay him,
Artemis, over the Lycian hills resplendent!
Bacchus, our name-god, golden in the dance
Of Maenad revelry,
Euoe! thy fiery torch advance
To slay the Death-god, the grim enemy,
God whom all other gods abhor to see.

Enter OEDIPUS from the Palace.

OEDIPUS: You have prayed; and your prayers shall be answered with help and release
If you will obey me, and are willing to put in hand
The remedy your distress requires. I speak
As a stranger, except by hearsay, to what has passed
And the story that has been told – without this clue
I should make but little headway in my search.
Therefore, as a citizen newly received among you,
It is to you, Thebans, I make this proclamation:
If any one of you knows whose hand it was
That killed Laius, the son of Labdacus,
Let him declare it fully, now, to me.

(He pauses: there is silence.)

Or if any man's conscience is guilty, let him give himself up.
He will suffer the less. His fate will be nothing worse
Than banishment. No other harm will touch him.

(The hearers are still silent.)

Or, if some alien is known to have been the assassin,
Declare it. The informer shall have his reward of me,
As well as the thanks he will earn from all of you.

(Silence still.)

But – if you will not speak, and any man
Is found to be screening himself or another, in fear,
I here pronounce my sentence upon his head:
No matter who he may be, he is forbidden
Shelter or intercourse with any man
In all this country over which I rule;
From fellowship of prayer or sacrifice
Or lustral rite is excommunicated;
Expelled from every house, unclean, accursed,
In accordance with the word of the Pythian oracle.
Thus I shall have done my duty to the god,
And to the dead. And it is my solemn prayer
That the unknown murderer, and his accomplices,
If such there be, may wear the brand of shame
For their shameful act, unfriended, to their life's end.
Nor do I exempt myself from the imprecation:
If, with my knowledge, house or hearth of mine
Receive the guilty man, upon my head
Lie all the curses I have laid on others.
It is for you to see this faithfully carried out,
As in duty bound to me, and to the god,
And to our suffering plague-tormented country.
Indeed I am surprised that no purification was made,
Even without the express command of heaven.
The death of a man so worthy, and your King,
Should surely have been probed to the utmost. Be that as it
may,
Now that I hold the place that he once held –
His bed, his wife – whose children, had fate so willed,
Would have grown to be another bond of blood between
And upon him, alas, has this disaster fallen; [us –

I mean to fight for him now, as I would fight
For my own father, and leave no way untried
To bring to light the killer of Laius,
The son of Labdacus, the son of Polydorus, the son of Cad-
mus, the son of Agenor.

The gods curse all that disobey this charge!
For them the earth be barren of harvest, for them
Women be childless; and may this present calamity,
And worse than this, pursue them to their death!
For the rest – you sons of Cadmus who are on my side –
May Justice and all the gods be with you for ever.

CHORUS: Under your curse, O King, I make bold to answer:
I am not the man, nor can I point him out.
The question came from Phoebus, and he, if anyone,
Could surely tell us who the offender is.

OEDIPUS: No doubt, but to compel a god to speak
Against his will, is not in mortal power.

CHORUS: I have another thing to say.

OEDIPUS: Say on.

Second, or third, thoughts – we will hear them all.

CHORUS: To the lord Phoebus the lord Teiresias
Stands nearest, I would say, in divination.

He is the one who could help us most in our search.

OEDIPUS: I have not overlooked it. I have sent for him –
It was Creon's advice – twice I have sent for him,
And am much surprised he is not already here.

CHORUS:

There were rumours, of course; but mostly old wives' tales.

OEDIPUS: Rumours? What rumours? I must hear them all.

CHORUS:

He was said to have been killed by travellers on the road.

OEDIPUS: So I have heard. But where are the witnesses?

CHORUS: He'd be a bold man, sir, that would pay no heed
To such a curse as yours, when he had heard it.

OEDIPUS: Will he fear words, that did not shrink from the
deed?

CHORUS:

There is one can find him out. They are bringing the prophet
In whom, of all men, lives the incarnate truth.

Enter TEIRESIAS, blind, led by an attendant.

OEDIPUS:

Teiresias, we know there is nothing beyond your ken;
Lore sacred and profane, all heavenly and earthly knowledge
Are in your grasp. In your heart, if not with the eye,
You see our city's condition: we look to you
As our only help and protector. We have sent –
They may have told you – to Phoebus, and he has answered.
The only way of deliverance from our plague
Is for us to find out the killers of Laius
And kill or banish them.

Now, sir, spare not your skill
In bird-lore or whatever other arts
Of prophecy you profess. It is for yourself,
It is for Thebes, it is for me. Come, save us all,
Save all that is polluted by this death.
We look to you. To help his fellow-men
With all his power is man's most noble work.

TEIRESIAS:

Wise words; but O, when wisdom brings no profit,
To be wise is to suffer. And why did I forget this,
Who knew it well? I never should have come.

OEDIPUS: It seems you bring us little encouragement.

TEIRESIAS: Let me go home. It will be easier thus
For you to bear your burden, and me mine.

OEDIPUS:

Take care, sir. You show yourself no friend to Thebes,
Whose son you are, if you refuse to answer.

TEIRESIAS: It is because I see your words, sir, tending
To no good end; therefore I guard my own.

OEDIPUS:

By the gods! If you know, do not refuse to speak!
We all beseech you; we are all your suppliants.

TEIRESIAS: You are all deluded. I refuse to utter
The heavy secrets of my soul – and yours.

OEDIPUS:

What? Something you know, and will not tell? You mean
To fail us and to see your city perish?

TEIRESIAS: I mean to spare you, and myself. Ask me
No more. It is useless. I will tell you nothing.

OEDIPUS: Nothing? Insolent scoundrel, you would rouse
A stone to fury! Will you never speak?

You are determined to be obstinate to the end?

TEIRESIAS: Do not blame me; put your own house in order.

OEDIPUS: Hear him! Such words – such insults to the State
Would move a saint to anger.

TEIRESIAS: What will be

Will be, though I should never speak again.

OEDIPUS: What is to be, it is your trade to tell.

TEIRESIAS: I tell no more. Rage with what wrath you will.

OEDIPUS: I shall; and speak my mind unflinchingly.

I tell you I do believe *you* had a hand
In plotting, and all but doing, this very act.
If you had eyes to see with, I would have said
Your hand, and yours alone, had done it all.

TEIRESIAS: You would so? Then hear this: upon your head
Is the ban your lips have uttered – from this day forth
Never to speak to me or any here.

You are the cursed polluter of this land.

OEDIPUS: You dare to say it! Have you no shame at all?
And do you expect to escape the consequence?

TEIRESIAS: I have escaped. The truth is my defence.

OEDIPUS: Whose work is this? This is no soothsaying.

TEIRESIAS:

You taught me. You made me say it against my will.

OEDIPUS: Say it again. Let there be no mistake.

TEIRESIAS:

Was it not plain? Or will you tempt me further?

OEDIPUS: I would have it beyond all doubt. Say it again.

TEIRESIAS: I say that the killer you are seeking is yourself.

OEDIPUS: The second time. You shall be sorry for this.

TEIRESIAS: Will you have more, to feed your anger?

OEDIPUS: Yes!

More, and more madness. Tell us all you know.

TEIRESIAS: I know, as you do not, that you are living

In sinful union with the one you love,

Living in ignorance of your own undoing.

OEDIPUS:

Do you think you can say such things with impunity?

TEIRESIAS: I do – if truth has any power to save.

OEDIPUS: It has – but not for you; no, not for you,

Shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot!

TEIRESIAS: You are to be pitied, uttering such taunts

As all men's mouths must some day cast at you.

OEDIPUS: Living in perpetual night, you cannot harm

Me, nor any man else that sees the light.

TEIRESIAS: No; it is not for me to bring you down.

That is in Apollo's hands, and he will do it.

OEDIPUS (*scenting a possible connection with Creon's embassy*):

Creon! Was this trick his, then, if not yours?

TEIRESIAS: Not Creon either. Your enemy is yourself.

OEDIPUS (*pursuing his own thought*):

Ah, riches and royalty, and wit matched against wit

In the race of life, must they always be mated with envy?

Must Creon, so long my friend, my most trusted friend,

Stalk me by stealth, and study to dispossess me

Of the power this city has given me – freely given –

Not of my asking – setting this schemer on me,

This pedlar of fraudulent magical tricks, with eyes

Wide open for profit, but blind in prophecy?

(*To TEIRESIAS*) What was your vaunted seercraft ever worth?

And where were you, when the Dog-faced Witch was here?

Had you any word of deliverance then for our people?

There was a riddle too deep for common wits;

A seer should have answered it; but answer came there none

From you; bird-lore and god-craft all were silent.

Until I came – I, ignorant Oedipus, came –

And stopped the riddler's mouth, guessing the truth

By mother-wit, not bird-lore. This is the man

Whom you would dispossess, hoping to stand

Nearest to Creon's throne. You shall repent,

You and your fellow-plotter, of your zeal

For scapegoat-hunting. Were you not as old

As you appear to be, sharp punishment

Would soon convince you of your wickedness.

CHORUS: Sir, to our thinking, both of you have spoken

In the heat of anger. Surely this is not well,

When all our thought should be, how to discharge

The god's command.

TEIRESIAS: King though you are, one right –

To answer – makes us equal; and I claim it.

It is not you, but Loxias, whom I serve;

Nor am I bound to Creon's patronage.

You are pleased to mock my blindness. Have you eyes,

And do not see your own damnation? Eyes,

And cannot see what company you keep?

Whose son are you? I tell you, you have sinned –

And do not know it – against your own on earth

And in the grave. A swift and two-edged sword,

Your mother's and your father's curse, shall sweep you

Out of this land. Those now clear-seeing eyes

Shall then be darkened, then no place be deaf,

No corner of Cithaeron echoless,

To your loud crying, when you learn the truth

Of that sweet marriage-song that hailed you home

To the fair-seeming haven of your hopes –

With more, more misery than you can guess,

To show you what you are, and who they are

That call you father. Rail as you will at Creon,

And at my speaking – you shall be trodden down

With fouler scorn than ever fell on man.

OEDIPUS: Shall I bear more of this? Out of my sight!

Go! Quickly, go! Back where you came from! Go!

TEIRESIAS: I will. It was your wish brought me here, not mine.

OEDIPUS: Had I known what madness I was to listen to,

I would have spared myself the trouble.

TEIRESIAS: Mad I may seem

To you. Your parents would not think me so.

OEDIPUS:

What's that? My parents? Who then ... gave me birth?

TEIRESIAS:

This day brings you your birth; and brings you death.

OEDIPUS:

Man, must you still wrap up your words in riddles?

TEIRESIAS: Were you not famed for skill at solving riddles?

OEDIPUS: You taunt me with the gift that is my greatness?

TEIRESIAS: Your great misfortune, and your ruin.

OEDIPUS: No matter!

I have saved this land from ruin. I am content.

TEIRESIAS:

Well, I will go. Your hand, boy. Take me home.

OEDIPUS: We well can spare you. Let him take you home.

TEIRESIAS: When I have said my all. Thus, to your face,

Fearful of nothing you can do to me:

The man for whom you have ordered hue and cry,

The killer of Laius – that man is *here*;

Passing for an alien, a sojourner here among us;

But, as presently shall appear, a Theban born,

To his cost. He that came seeing, blind shall he go;

Rich now, then a beggar; stick-in-hand, groping his way

To a land of exile; brother, as it shall be shown,

And father at once, to the children he cherishes; son,

And husband, to the woman who bore him; father-killer,

And father-supplanter.

Go in, and think on this.

When you can prove me wrong, then call me blind.

Exeunt.

CHORUS:

From the Delphian rock the heavenly voice denounces

The shedder of blood, the doer of deeds unnamed.

Who is the man?

Let him fly with the speed of horses racing the wind.

The son of Zeus, armed with his fires, his lightnings,

Leaps to destroy,

And the Fates sure-footed close around him.

Out from the snowy dawn on high Parnassus

The order flashed, to hunt a man from his hiding.

And where is he?

In forest or cave, a wild ox roaming the mountains,

Footing a friendless way; but the deathless voices

Live in his ear;

From the Heart of Earth they cry against him.

Terrible things indeed has the prophet spoken.

We cannot believe, we cannot deny; all's dark.

We fear, but we cannot see, what is before us.

Was there a quarrel between the house of Labdacus

And the son of Polybus? None that we ever knew,

For which to impugn the name of Oedipus,

Or seek to avenge the house of Labdacus

For the undiscovered death.

All secrets of earth are known to Zeus and Apollo;

But of mortal prophets, that one knows more than another

No man can surely say; wisdom is given

To all in their several degrees. I impute no blame

Till blame is proved. He faced the winged Enchantress,

And stood to the test, winning golden opinions.

Never, therefore, will I consent

To think him other than good.

Enter CREON.

CREON: Citizens! They tell me that King Oedipus

Has laid a slanderous accusation on me.

I will not bear it! If he thinks that I
Have done him any harm, by word or act,
In this calamitous hour, I will not live –
Life is too long a time – to hear such scandal!
Nay, more than scandal, a grievous imputation,
If you, my friends, my country, call me traitor.
CHORUS: The words, I think, were spoken in the stress
Of anger, ill-considered.

CREON: And did he say
The prophet lied under my instigation?
CHORUS: He did; with what intention I cannot tell.
CREON: Said with unflinching eye was it? Deliberate –
This accusation that he made against me?
CHORUS: I do not scrutinize my master's actions.
But here he comes.

Enter OEDIPUS.

OEDIPUS: Well, sir? What brings you here?
Have you the face to stand before my door,
Proved plotter against my life, thief of my crown?
Do you take me for a coward, or a fool?
Did you suppose I wanted eyes to see
The plot preparing, wits to counter it?
And what a foolish plot! You, without backing
Of friends or purse, to go in quest of kingship!
Kingdoms are won by men and moneybags.
CREON: Hear my reply. And when you know, then judge.
OEDIPUS: I doubt your eloquence will teach me much.
You are my bitterest enemy; that I know.
CREON: First, let me tell you –
OEDIPUS: Tell me anything
Except that you are honest.
CREON: Can you believe
This obstinacy does you any good?
OEDIPUS: Can *you* believe that you may carry on
Intrigues against your house and go scot-free?
CREON: I should be a fool to believe it. Tell me, though,

What wrong you think I have done you.
OEDIPUS: Was it you
That made me bring that canting prophet here?
CREON: It was; and I would do the same again.
OEDIPUS: Tell me ... how long ago did Laius ...
CREON: Did Laius – what? I do not understand.
OEDIPUS: How long is it since Laius ... disappeared?
CREON: A long time now; longer than I can say.
OEDIPUS: Was this old prophet at his business then?
CREON: Yes, held in equal honour then as now.
OEDIPUS: In those days, did he ever mention me?
CREON: Not in my hearing.
OEDIPUS: Was there no inquest made
Into this death?
CREON: Indeed there was. In vain.
OEDIPUS: And the man of wisdom – why was he silent then?
CREON: I do not presume to say more than I know.
OEDIPUS:
One thing you know, and would be wise to confess.
CREON: What I know I will freely confess. What do I know?
OEDIPUS:
This: that without your prompting, the fortune-teller
Would never have dared to name *me* killer of Laius.
CREON: If he did so, you know best. But give me leave,
As you have questioned me, to question you.
OEDIPUS: Ask on. You cannot prove me guilty of blood.
CREON: Are you my sister's husband?
OEDIPUS: Sir, I am.
CREON: And she your equal partner in rule and possession?
OEDIPUS: All that she can desire is hers by right.
CREON: Have I a third and equal share of honour?
OEDIPUS: You have; so much the more your proven falseness.
CREON: But I deny it. Reason with yourself,
As I; and ask, would any man exchange
A quiet life, with royal rank assured,
For an uneasy throne? To be a king

In name, was never part of my ambition;
 Enough for me to live a kingly life.
 What more could any moderate man desire?
 I have your ear for all my fair requests;
 But, in your place, I should have much to do
 That irked me. How could kingship please me more
 Than royalty and rule without regret?
 I am not yet so besotted as to seek
 More honours than are good for me. I stand
 In all men's favour, I am all men's friend.
 Why, those who seek your audience, ask for me,
 Knowing that way the surest to success!
 And would I change this life for the other? No;
 None but a fool would be so faithless. Treason?
 That's not my policy, nor, if I know it,
 The policy of any friend of mine.

To test me; first, go to the Pythian shrine;
 Ask if the message I brought back was true.
 Second; prove me guilty of any compact
 With the soothsayer; then take me and condemn
 To death. My voice will join with yours in the sentence.

But charged behind my back on blind suspicion
 I will not be. To slur a good man's name
 With baseless slander is one crime – another
 Is rashly to mistake bad men for good.
 Cast out an honest friend, and you cast out
 Your life, your dearest treasure. Time will teach
 The truth of this; for time alone can prove
 The honest man; one day proclaims the sinner.

CHORUS: Good words; and fitting for a prudent man
 To hear and heed. Quick thoughts are seldom safest.

OEDIPUS: When a quick plotter's on the move, my friend,
 It's safest to be quick in counter-plotting.

Am I to sit and wait for him, and lose
 My opportunity while he takes his?

CREON: What do you want then? Will you banish me?

OEDIPUS:

By no means. I would have you dead, not banished.

CREON: If you can show in what way I have wronged you –

OEDIPUS: Still clinging to your obstinate arguments?

CREON: Because I know you are wrong.

OEDIPUS: I know I am right.

CREON: In your *own* eyes, not in mine.

OEDIPUS: *You* are a knave.

CREON: And what if you are mistaken?

OEDIPUS: Kings must rule.

CREON: Not when they rule unjustly.

OEDIPUS: Hear him, Thebes!

My city!

CREON: Yours? Is she not also mine?

CHORUS: Sirs, sir, enough. Here comes the queen, Jocasta.

She should be able to compose this quarrel.

Enter JOCASTA from the Palace.

JOCASTA: What is the meaning of this loud argument,
 You quarrelsome men? I wonder you are not ashamed,
 In this time of distress, to air your private troubles.
 Come in, my husband; and Creon, you go home.
 You are making much of some unimportant grievance.

CREON: Not so, my sister. Your husband Oedipus
 Condemns me out of hand with a terrible sentence,
 A choice of death or banishment.

OEDIPUS: It is true.

I have found him craftily plotting against my person.

CREON: May the curse of heaven rest on me for ever,
 If I am guilty of any such design!

JOCASTA: For the love of God, believe it, Oedipus!
 For his oath's sake, O believe it, and for mine
 And theirs who are here to witness!

CHORUS: Consent, O King, consent.

Be merciful, and learn to yield.

OEDIPUS: And why should I repent?

CHORUS: His oath should be his shield.

Who never played you false before.

OEDIPUS: You know for what you pray?

CHORUS: We know.

OEDIPUS: Say more.

CHORUS: He swore

His friendship; is it right to cast away

A friend, condemned unheard.

Upon an idle word?

OEDIPUS: In asking this you ask my death or banishment.

CHORUS: Forbid the thought! O by the Lord of Life,

The Sun, forbid! Lost may I be

To God and man, if it was ever mine.

But while our people pine,

My heart is racked anew

If you,

My princes, add your strife

To our old misery.

OEDIPUS: Then let him go; even though it mean my death

Or exile in disgrace. Your voice, not his,

Has won my mercy; him I hate for ever.

CREON: In mercy obdurate, as harsh in anger –

Such natures earn self-torture.

OEDIPUS: Will you begone?

CREON: I will; unjustly judged by you alone.

Exit

CHORUS: Persuade, madam, persuade

The King to go awhile apart.

JOCASTA: How was this trouble made?

CHORUS: Wild surmise; and the smart

Of baseless calumny grew hot.

JOCASTA: Each holding each to blame?

CHORUS: Just so.

JOCASTA: For what?

CHORUS: Ask not

Again; enough our stricken country's shame.

To let this other rest

Where it remains, were best.

OEDIPUS:

A fine peacemakers' part your worships would have played!

CHORUS: Hear yet again, O King; believe us true!

Could ours be such simplicity

As rashly from his sheltering arms to stray,

Whose wisdom in the day

Of wrath upheld our land,

Whose hand

Again shall lead us through

Storm to tranquillity?

JOCASTA: Will you not tell me too? Tell me, I implore you,
Why you have conceived this terrible hatred against him.

OEDIPUS: I will. You are more to me than these good men.

The fault is Creon's, and his this plot against me.

JOCASTA: How was it his? What is the accusation?

OEDIPUS: He says the murder of Laius was my doing.

JOCASTA: From his own knowledge, or other men's report?

OEDIPUS: Ah, there's his cleverness; he shields himself

By using a rascally soothsayer as his tool.

JOCASTA: Then absolve yourself at once. For I can tell you,
No man possesses the secret of divination.

And I have proof. An oracle was given to Laius –

From Phoebus, no; but from his ministers –

That he should die by the hands of his own child,

His child and mine. What came of it? Laius,

It is common knowledge, was killed by outland robbers

At a place where three roads meet. As for the child,

It was not yet three days old, when he cast it out

(By other hands, not his) with rivetted ankles

To perish on the empty mountain-side.

There, then, Apollo did not so contrive it.

The offspring did not kill the father; the father,

For all his fears, was killed – not by his son.

Yet such were the prophets' warnings. Why should you,

Then, heed them for a moment? What he intends,

The god will show us in his own good time.

OEDIPUS: My wife, what you have said has troubled me.

My mind goes back ... and something in me moves ...

JOCASTA:

Why? What is the matter? How you turn and start!

OEDIPUS: Did you not say that Laius was killed

At a place where three roads meet?

JOCASTA: That was the story;

And is the story still.

OEDIPUS: Where? In what country?

JOCASTA: The land called Phocis – where the road divides,
Leading to Delphi and to Daulia.

OEDIPUS: How long ago did it happen?

JOCASTA: It became known

A little time before your reign began.

OEDIPUS: O God, what wilt thou do to me!

JOCASTA: Why, Oedipus,

What weighs upon your mind?

OEDIPUS: O do not ask!

But tell me, what was Laius like? How old?

JOCASTA: Tall – silver-frosted hair – about your figure.

OEDIPUS: Ah, wretch! Am I unwittingly self-cursed?

JOCASTA: What, O my King, what is it? You frighten me.

OEDIPUS: Had then the prophet eyes? O is it possible?

To prove it certain, tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA: You frighten me. I will tell you all I know.

OEDIPUS: How was the King attended? By a few,

Or in full state with numerous bodyguard?

JOCASTA: Five men in all, a herald leading them;

One carriage only, in which King Laius rode.

OEDIPUS: Clearer, alas, too clear! Who told you this?

JOCASTA: A servant, the only survivor that returned.

OEDIPUS: Is he still in the household?

JOCASTA: No. When he came back,

And found you king in his late master's place,

He earnestly begged me to let him go away

Into the country to become a shepherd,

Far from the city's eyes. I let him go.

Poor fellow, he might have asked a greater favour;

He was a good slave.

OEDIPUS: Could we have him here

Without delay?

JOCASTA: We could. Why do you ask?

OEDIPUS: O wife, I fear ... I fear that I have said

Too much, and therefore I must see this man.

JOCASTA: Well, you shall see him. Meantime, may I not hear

What weighs so heavily on your heart?

OEDIPUS: You shall.

If things are as I see them, you are the first

To whom I would tell my story. Listen then.

My father was a Corinthian, Polybus;

My mother a Dorian, Meropé. At home

I rose to be a person of some pre-eminence;

Until a strange thing happened – a curious thing –

Though perhaps I took it to heart more than it deserved.

One day at table, a fellow who had been drinking deeply

Made bold to say I was not my father's son.

That hurt me; but for the time I suffered in silence

As well as I could. Next day I approached my parents

And asked them to tell me the truth. They were bitterly

That anyone should dare to put such a story about; [angry

And I was relieved. Yet somehow the smart remained;

And a thing like that soon passes from hand to hand.

So, without my parents' knowledge, I went to Pytho;

But came back disappointed of any answer

To the question I asked, having heard instead a tale

Of horror and misery: how I must marry my mother,

And become the parent of a misbegotten brood,

An offence to all mankind – and kill my father.

At this I fled away, putting the stars

Between me and Corinth, never to see home again,

That no such horror should ever come to pass.

My journey brought me into the neighbourhood where
Your late king met his end. Listen, my wife:
This is the truth.

When I came to the place where three roads join, I met
A herald followed by a horse-drawn carriage, and a man
Seated therein, just as you have described.

The leader roughly ordered me out of the way;
And his venerable master joined in with a surly command.
It was the driver that thrust me aside, and him I struck,
For I was angry. The old man saw it, leaning from the
carriage,

Waited until I passed, then, seizing for weapon
The driver's two-pronged goad, struck me on the head.
He paid with interest for his temerity;
Quick as lightning, the staff in this right hand
Did its work; he tumbled headlong out of the carriage,
And every man of them there I killed.

But now,
If the blood of Laius ran in this stranger's veins,
Is there any more wretched mortal than I, more hated
By God and man? It is I whom no stranger, no citizen,
Must take to his house; I to whom none may speak;
On me is the curse that none but I have laid.
His wife! – these hands that killed him have touched *her*!
Is this my sin? Am I not utterly foul?
Banished from here, and in my banishment
Debarred from home and from my fatherland,
Which I must shun for ever, lest I live
To make my mother my wife, and kill my father ...
My father ... Polybus, to whom I owe my life.
Can it be any but some monstrous god
Of evil that has sent this doom upon me?

O never, never, holy powers above,
May that day come! May I be sooner dead
And blotted from the face of earth, than live
To bear the scars of such vile circumstance.

CHORUS: Sir, these are terrible words. But yet be hopeful,
Until you learn the whole truth from our witness.

OEDIPUS: That is my only hope; to await the shepherd.

JOCASTA: And why? What help do you expect from him?

OEDIPUS: This: if we find his story fits with yours,
I am absolved.

JOCASTA: In what particular point?

What did I say?

OEDIPUS: You said he spoke of *robbers* –

That *robbers* killed him. If he still says *robbers*,

It was not I; one is not more than one.

But if he speaks of one lone wayfarer,

There is no escape; the finger points to me.

JOCASTA: Oh but I assure you that was what he said;

He cannot go back on it now – the whole town heard it.

Not only I. And even if he changes his story

In some small point, he cannot in any event

Pretend that Laius died as was foretold.

For Loxias said a child of mine should kill him.

It was not to be; poor child, it was he that died.

A fig for divination! After this

I would not cross the road for any of it.

OEDIPUS: You are right. Still, let us have the shepherd here.

Send one to fetch him.

JOCASTA: I will at once. Come in.

I will do nothing other than you wish.

Exeunt.

CHORUS:

I only ask to live, with pure faith keeping

In word and deed that Law which leaps the sky,

Made of no mortal mould, undimmed, unsleeping

Whose living godhead does not age or die.

Pride breeds the Tyrant; swollen with ill-found booty,

From castled height Pride tumbles to the pit,

All footing lost. Zeal, stripped for civic duty,

No law forbids; may God still prosper it.

Who walks his own high-handed way, disdaining
True righteousness and holy ornament;
Who falsely wins, all sacred things profaning;
Shall he escape his doomed pride's punishment?

Shall he by any armour be defended
From God's sharp wrath, who casts out right for wrong?
If wickedness for virtue be commended,
Farewell, sweet harmonies of sacred song;

Farewell, Abaeon and Olympian altar;
Farewell, O Heart of Earth, inviolate shrine,
If at this time your omens fail or falter,
And man no longer own your voice divine.

Zeus! If thou livest, all-ruling, all-pervading,
Awake; old oracles are out of mind;
Apollo's name denied, his glory fading;
There is no godliness in all mankind.

*Enter JOCASTA from the Palace, carrying
a garlanded branch and incense.*

JOCASTA: My lords, I am minded to visit the holy temples,
Bringing in my hands these tokens of supplication
And gifts of incense. The King is over-wrought
With fancies, and can no longer sanely judge
The present by the past, listening to every word
That feeds his apprehension. I can do nothing
To comfort him.
To thee, Bright Shining Apollo,
Who art nearest to my door, is my first prayer.
Save us from the curse of this uncleanness, save!
We are afraid, seeing our master-pilot distraught.
She makes her oblations to the altars.

Enter a MESSENGER FROM CORINTH.

MESSENGER: By your leave, strangers; I am seeking the
house of Oedipus.

Can you guide me to it – or to him, if you know where he is?
CHORUS: This is the house, sir; and he is within. This lady
Is his wife and the mother of his children.

MESSENGER: Blessing attend her,
And all her house, true consort of such a man.

JOCASTA: Blessing on you, sir, and thanks for your kindly
You bring a request or message, sir? [greeting.

MESSENGER: Good news
For your husband, honourable lady, and for his house.

JOCASTA: What news? And from whom?

MESSENGER: From Corinth. You cannot but be glad
At the message – though you may also be distressed.

JOCASTA: What is it that can have such power to please and
MESSENGER: [grieve?

Our people – such was the talk – will make him king
Of all the Isthmus.

JOCASTA: Is Polybus king no longer?

MESSENGER: King Polybus, madam, is dead and in his grave.

JOCASTA: What? Dead? The father of Oedipus?

MESSENGER: Ay, on my life.

JOCASTA (to an attendant): Girl! To your master quickly!

Tell him this news. (*The attendant goes*)

Where are you now, divine prognostications!

The man whom Oedipus has avoided all these years,
Lest he should kill him – dead! By a natural death,
And by no act of his!

Enter OEDIPUS.

OEDIPUS: My dear Jocasta,

Why have you called me out of doors again?

JOCASTA:

Hear this man's news; and when you have heard it, say
What has become of the famous oracles.

OEDIPUS: Who is this man? What news has he for me?

JOCASTA: He comes from Corinth. Your father, Polybus,
Is dead – dead!

OEDIPUS: What, sir? Tell me yourself.

MESSENGER: I do assure you, sir – if you must have this first –
He is gone the way of all mortality.

OEDIPUS: By foul play, or the accident of sickness?

MESSENGER: Such little accident as puts the old to sleep.

OEDIPUS: You mean he died of illness, poor old man.

MESSENGER: That, and the tale of years he had fulfilled.

OEDIPUS:

Well, well ... So, wife, what of the Pythian fire,

The oracles, the prophesying birds,

That scream above us? I was to kill my father;

Now he lies in his grave, and here am I

Who never touched a weapon ... unless it could be said

Grief at my absence killed him – and so *I* killed him.

But no, the letter of the oracle

Is unfulfilled and lies, like Polybus, dead.

JOCASTA: Have I not said so all this while?

OEDIPUS: You have.

My fear misled me.

JOCASTA: Think no more of it.

OEDIPUS: There is the other still to fear ... my mother ...

JOCASTA: Fear? What has a man to do with fear?

Chance rules our lives, and the future is all unknown.

Best live as best we may, from day to day.

Nor need this mother-marrying frighten you;

Many a man has dreamt as much. Such things

Must be forgotten, if life is to be endured.

OEDIPUS: If she were dead, you might have spoken so

With justice; but she lives; and while she lives,

Say what you will, I cannot cease to fear.

JOCASTA: At least your father's death is a relief.

OEDIPUS: Agreed; but while *she* lives, I am not safe.

MESSENGER:

But pray, sir, who is the woman whom you still fear?

OEDIPUS: Why, sir, Queen Meropé, wife of Polybus.

MESSENGER: And she? How does her life endanger yours?

OEDIPUS: We have an oracle, sir, of deadly tenor.

MESSENGER: Is it one that may rightly be uttered to a stranger?

OEDIPUS: It is. Loxias said I was foredoomed

To make my mother my wife, and kill my father,

With my own hands shedding his blood. This is the reason

Of my long estrangement from Corinth. And I have fared
well,

Though nothing can fill the place of absent parents.

MESSENGER:

Was that the fear that has banished you all this while?

OEDIPUS: Yes. I was determined not to kill my father.

MESSENGER: Then let me rid you of this other fear.

I came to do you good –

OEDIPUS: My gratitude

Shall not be stinted.

MESSENGER: And, if the truth were told,

To do myself good on your coming home.

OEDIPUS: Home, never! Never beneath my parents' roof –

MESSENGER: My dear young man, you are deceived.

OEDIPUS: How so?

Good sir, for God's sake, tell me.

MESSENGER: This fear that bars you from your home –

OEDIPUS: Ay, that.

The word of Phoebus may yet be true for me.

MESSENGER: That story of pollution through your parents?

OEDIPUS: Ay, that, sir; that, my ever-present torment.

MESSENGER: All idle, sir; your fears are groundless, vain.

OEDIPUS: How can that be, seeing I am their son?

MESSENGER: No. Polybus is no kin of yours.

OEDIPUS: No kin?

Polybus not my father?

MESSENGER: No more than I.

OEDIPUS: Come, sir; no more than you? Explain yourself.

MESSENGER: I am not your father, neither is Polybus.

OEDIPUS: How comes it then that I was called his son?

MESSENGER: I will tell you. You were given to him – by me.

OEDIPUS: Given? And yet he loved me as his son?

MESSENGER: He had no other.

OEDIPUS: Was I ... found? Or bought?

MESSENGER: Found, in a wooded hollow of Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS: What brought you there?

MESSENGER: Sheep-tending on the mountain.

OEDIPUS: Were you a hireling shepherd then?

MESSENGER: I was;

And, by that happy chance, your rescuer.

OEDIPUS: Why, was I in pain or danger when you took me?

MESSENGER: The infirmity in your ankles tells the tale.

OEDIPUS: Oh, that old trouble; need we mention it?

MESSENGER: Your ankles were rivetted, and I set you free.

OEDIPUS: It is true; I have carried the stigma from my cradle.

MESSENGER: To it you owe your present name.

OEDIPUS: O Gods!

Was this my father's or my mother's doing?

MESSENGER: I cannot say. Ask him who gave you to me.

OEDIPUS: Gave me? Did you not find me, then, yourself?

MESSENGER: Another shepherd entrusted you to my care.

OEDIPUS: And who was he? Can you tell us who he was?

MESSENGER: I think he was said to be one of Laius' men.

OEDIPUS: Laius? Our former king?

MESSENGER: Why, yes; King Laius.

The man was one of his servants.

OEDIPUS: Is he alive?

And could I see him?

MESSENGER: Your people here should know.

OEDIPUS: Good men, does any of you know the fellow -

This shepherd of whom he speaks? Has anyone seen him
In the pastures or in the city? Speak if you know.

Now is the chance to get to the bottom of the mystery.

CHORUS: I think he will prove to be that same countryman

Whom you have already asked to see. The Queen

Is the one most able to tell you if this is so.

OEDIPUS: My wife, *you* know the man whom we have sent for.

Is that the man he means?

JOCASTA (*white with terror*): What does it matter

What man he means? It makes no difference now ...

Forget what he has told you ... It makes no difference.

OEDIPUS: Nonsense: I must pursue this trail to the end,

Till I have unravelled the mystery of my birth.

JOCASTA: No! In God's name - if you want to live, this

Must not go on. Have I not suffered enough? [quest

OEDIPUS:

There is nothing to fear. Though I be proved slave-born

To the third generation, *your* honour is not impugned.

JOCASTA: Yet do not do it. I implore you, do not do it.

OEDIPUS: I must. I cannot leave the truth unknown.

JOCASTA: I know I am right. I am warning you for your
good.

OEDIPUS: My 'good' has been my bugbear long enough.

JOCASTA: Doomed man! O never live to learn the truth!

OEDIPUS: Go, someone; fetch the shepherd. Leave the lady
To enjoy her pride of birth.

JOCASTA: O lost and damned!

This is my last and only word to you

For ever!

Exit.

CHORUS:

Why has the Queen, sir, left us in such deep passion?

I fear some vile catastrophe will out

From what she dare not tell.

OEDIPUS: Let all come out,

However vile! However base it be,

I must unlock the secret of my birth.

The woman, with more than woman's pride, is shamed

By my low origin. I am the child of Fortune,

The giver of good, and I shall not be shamed.

She is my mother; my sisters are the Seasons;

My rising and my falling march with theirs.

Born thus, I ask to be no other man

Than that I am, and *will know who I am.*

CHORUS: If my prophetic eye fails not, tomorrow's moon
 Makes known to all the earth
 The secret of our master's birth.
 Cithaeron's name shall fill
 Our song; his father, mother, nurse was she,
 And for this boon
 To our great King, praised shall Cithaeron be.
 Phoebus our Lord, be this according to thy will.

Was this the offspring born of some primeval sprite
 By the love-glance beguiled
 Of mountain-haunting Pan? Or child
 Of Loxias, very son
 To our bright God who walks the high grass-lands?
 Did he delight
 Cyllene's lord? Did Dionysus' hands
 Receive him from a nymph he loved on Helicon?

OEDIPUS: Elders, I think I see our shepherd approaching.
 I guess it is he, though I never set eyes on him.
 He and our Corinthian friend are of like age.
 And those are my men that bring him. It must be he.
 But you could tell more surely, if you know him.
 CHORUS: Yes, it is he. I know him. Laius' shepherd –
 As good a man as any in his service.

Enter an elderly SHEPHERD, escorted by attendants.

OEDIPUS: Now, good Corinthian, your evidence first –
 Is this the man you spoke of?

MESSANGER: This is the man.

OEDIPUS: Come now, old shepherd – please to look at me,
 And answer my questions. Were you in Laius' service?

SHEPHERD: Indeed I was, sir; born and bred, not bought.

OEDIPUS: What trade or occupation did you follow?

SHEPHERD: The most part of my life a shepherd, sir.

OEDIPUS: What part of the country did you mostly work?

SHEPHERD:

'Twould be ... Cithaeron – or somewhere thereabouts.

OEDIPUS: Do you remember having seen this man before?

SHEPHERD:

What man is that, sir? Where would I have seen him?

OEDIPUS: This man. Did you ever meet him anywhere?

SHEPHERD: I cannot say I did, sir – not to remember.

MESSANGER: I am not surprised. I'll jog his memory.

He won't forget the days when he and I

Were neighbours on Cithaeron – he with two flocks
 And I with one; three seasons we were there

From spring to autumn; and I would drive my flock
 Back Corinth way for winter, and he to Thebes

To Laius' folds. Was that the way it was?

SHEPHERD: Ay, that's how it was. 'Tis many years ago.

MESSANGER: Well then, maybe you remember a baby boy
 You gave me, and asked me to rear it as my own?

SHEPHERD (*with frightened eyes*):

What do you mean? What are you asking me to say?

MESSANGER: Why, my old friend, *here* stands your baby boy!

SHEPHERD: Damn you, man, hold your tongue!

OEDIPUS: Come, come, old fellow;

He speaks more honestly than you, I think.

SHEPHERD: Why, how have I offended, honourable master?

OEDIPUS:

Not answering straightly his question about that child.

SHEPHERD:

He doesn't know what he is saying. He is making a mistake.

OEDIPUS:

If you won't speak willingly, we must make you speak.

SHEPHERD: Don't hurt an old man, sir, for the love of God!

OEDIPUS: Pinion his arms, there!

SHEPHERD: O sir, why, what is this?

What more do you ask to know?

OEDIPUS: This child he speaks of –

Was it you that gave it to him?

SHEPHERD: Yes, it was.

I wish I might have died that very day.

OEDIPUS: As you shall now, unless you tell the truth.

SHEPHERD: 'Twill be my death to tell it.

OEDIPUS: Evasion still!

SHEPHERD: Have I not said I gave it him? What more?

OEDIPUS: Where did it come from? Your home or another's?

SHEPHERD: Not mine. Another man's.

OEDIPUS: What man? What house?

SHEPHERD: By all the gods, master, ask me no more!

OEDIPUS: Answer! If I must speak again, you die!

SHEPHERD: It was ... a child of Laius' house.

OEDIPUS: A slave?

Or of his own begetting?

SHEPHERD: Must I tell?

OEDIPUS: You must. And I must hear.

SHEPHERD: It was his child,

They said. Your lady could tell the truth of it.

OEDIPUS: *She* gave it you?

SHEPHERD: Yes, master.

OEDIPUS: To what purpose?

SHEPHERD: To be destroyed.

OEDIPUS: The child she bore!

SHEPHERD: Yes, master.

They said 'twas on account of some wicked spell.

OEDIPUS: What spell?

SHEPHERD: Saying the child should kill its father.

OEDIPUS: In God's name, what made you give it to this man?

SHEPHERD: I hadn't the heart to destroy it, master. I thought

'He will take it away to another country, his home'.

He took it and saved its life - to come to this!

If you are the man, O then your life is lost!

OEDIPUS: Alas! All out! All known, no more concealment!

O Light! May I never look on you again,

Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting,

Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood!

Exit.

The MESSENGER and SHEPHERD depart.

CHORUS:

All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing!
Show me the man whose happiness was anything more than
illusion

Followed by disillusion.

Here is the instance, here is Oedipus, here is the reason

Why I will call no mortal creature happy.

With what supreme sureness of aim he winged his quarry;
Grasped every prize, by Zeus! once he had drowned the
The Claw-foot Lady. [She-devil,

He was our bastion against disaster, our honoured King;
All Thebes was proud of the majesty of his name.

And now, where is a more heart-rending story of
affliction?

Where a more awful swerve into the arms of torment?

O Oedipus, that proud head!

When the same bosom enfolded the son and the father,

Could not the engendering clay have shouted aloud its
indignation?

Time sees all; and now he has found you, when you least
expected it;

Has found you and judged that marriage-mockery, bride-
This is your elegy: [groom-son!

I wish I had never seen you, offspring of Laius,

Yesterday my morning of light, now my night of endless
darkness!

Enter an ATTENDANT from the Palace.

ATTENDANT:

O you most honourable lords of the city of Thebes,
Weep for the things you shall hear, the things you must see,
If you are true sons and loyal to the house of Labdacus.
Not all the waters of Ister, the waters of Phasis,
Can wash this dwelling clean of the foulness within,
Clean of the deliberate acts that soon shall be known,
Of all horrible acts most horrible, wilfully chosen.

CHORUS:

Already we have wept enough for the things we have known,

The things we have seen. What more will your story add?

ATTENDANT: First, and in brief – Her Majesty is dead.

CHORUS: Alas, poor soul: what brought her to this end?

ATTENDANT: Her own hand did it. You that have not seen,
And shall not see, this worst, shall suffer the less.

But I that saw, will remember, and will tell what I remember

Of her last agony.

You saw her cross the threshold
In desperate passion. Straight to her bridal-bed
She hurried, fastening her fingers in her hair.
There in her chamber, the doors flung sharply to,
She cried aloud to Laius long since dead,
Remembering the son she bore long since, the son
By whom the sire was slain, the son to whom
The mother bore yet other children, fruit
Of luckless misbegetting. There she bewailed
The twice confounded issue of her wifedom –
Husband begotten of husband, child of child.
So much we heard. Her death was hidden from us.
Before we could see out her tragedy,
The King broke in with piercing cries, and all
Had eyes only for him. This way and that
He strode among us. 'A sword, a sword!' he cried;
'Where is that wife, no wife of mine – that soil
Where I was sown, and whence I reaped my harvest!' –
While thus he raved, some demon guided him –
For none of us dared speak – to where she was.
As if in answer to some leader's call
With wild hallooing cries he hurled himself
Upon the locked doors, bending by main force
The bolts out of their sockets – and stumbled in.
We saw a knotted pendulum, a noose,

A strangled woman swinging before our eyes.

The King saw too, and with heart-rending groans
Untied the rope, and laid her on the ground.

But worse was yet to see. Her dress was pinned
With golden brooches, which the King snatched out
And thrust, from full arm's length, into his eyes –
Eyes that should see no longer his shame, his guilt,
No longer see those they should never have seen,
Nor see, unseeing, those he had longed to see,
Henceforth seeing nothing but night ... To this wild tune
He pierced his eyeballs time and time again,
Till bloody tears ran down his beard – not drops
But in full spate a whole cascade descending
In drenching cataracts of scarlet rain.

Thus two have sinned; and on two heads, not one –
On man and wife – falls mingled punishment.
Their old long happiness of former times
Was happiness earned with justice; but to-day
Calamity, death, ruin, tears, and shame,
All ills that there are names for – all are here.

CHORUS: And he – how is he now? Does he still suffer?

ATTENDANT: He shouts for someone to unbar the doors.

And show all Thebes the father's murderer,
The mother's – shame forbids the unholy word.
Incontinently he will fly the country
To rid his house of the curse of his own lips;
But scarcely has the strength, poor sufferer,
And none to guide him. He cannot bear the pain.
As you shall see. The doors are opening.
Yes, you shall see a sorry spectacle
That loathing cannot choose but pity ...

Enter OEDIPUS blind.

CHORUS: Ah!

Horror beyond all bearing!
Foulest disfigurement
That ever I saw! O cruel,

Insensate agony!
 What demon of destiny
 With swift assault outstriding
 Has ridden you down?
 O tortured head!
 I dare not see, I am hiding
 My eyes, I cannot bear
 What most I long to see;
 And what I long to hear,
 That most I dread.

OEDIPUS: O agony!
 Where am I? Is this my voice
 That is borne on the air?
 What fate has come to me?

CHORUS: Unspeakable to mortal ear,
 Too terrible for eyes to see.

OEDIPUS: O dark intolerable inescapable night
 That has no day!
 Cloud that no air can take away!
 O and again
 That piercing pain,
 Torture in the flesh and in the soul's dark memory.

CHORUS: It must be so; such suffering must needs be borne
 Twice; once in the body and once in the soul.

OEDIPUS: Is that my true and ever-faithful friend
 Still at my side?
 Your hand shall be the blind man's guide.
 Are you still near?
 That voice I hear
 Is yours, although your face I cannot see.

CHORUS:
 Those eyes – how could you do what you have done?
 What evil power has driven you to this end?

OEDIPUS: Apollo, friends, Apollo
 Has laid this agony upon me;
 Not by his hand; I did it.

What should I do with eyes
 Where all is ugliness?

CHORUS: It cannot be denied.

OEDIPUS: Where is there any beauty
 For me to see? Where loveliness
 Of sight or sound? Away!
 Lead me quickly away
 Out of this land. I am lost,
 Hated of gods, no man so damned.

CHORUS: Twice-tormented; in the spirit, as in the flesh.
 Would you had never lived to read this riddle.

OEDIPUS: Cursed be the benefactor
 That loosed my feet and gave me life
 For death; a poor exchange.
 Death would have been a boon
 To me and all of mine.

CHORUS: We could have wished it so.

OEDIPUS: Now, shedder of father's blood,
 Husband of mother, is my name;
 Godless and child of shame,
 Begetter of brother-sons;
 What infamy remains
 That is not spoken of Oedipus?

CHORUS: Yet to my thinking this act was ill-advised;
 It would have been better to die than live in blindness.

OEDIPUS: I will not believe that this was not the best
 That could have been done. Teach me no other lesson.
 How could I meet my father beyond the grave
 With seeing eyes; or my unhappy mother,
 Against whom I have committed such heinous sin
 As no mere death could pay for? Could I still love
 To look at my children, begotten as they were begotten?
 Could I want eyes to see that pretty sight?
 To see the towers of Thebes, her holy images,
 Which I, her noblest, most unhappy son
 Have forbidden myself to see – having commanded

All men to cast away the offence, the unclean,
Whom the gods have declared accursed, the son of Laius,
And, having proved myself that branded man,
Could I want sight to face this people's stare?
No! Hearing neither! Had I any way
To dam that channel too, I would not rest
Till I had prisoned up this body of shame
In total blankness. For the mind to dwell
Beyond the reach of pain, were peace indeed.

Cithaeron! Foster-mother! Did you shelter me
For this? Could you not let me die that instant,
Instead of saving me to tell the world
How I was got? Corinth, and Polybus,
My seeming home and parent, did you think
What foul corruption festered under the bloom
Of your adopted son's young loveliness? –
Now found all evil and of evil born.

That silent crossroad in the forest clearing –
That copse beside the place where three roads met,
Whose soil I watered with my father's blood,
My blood – will they remember what they saw,
And what I came that way to Thebes to do?
Incestuous sin! Breeding where I was bred!
Father, brother, and son; bride, wife, and mother;
Confounded in one monstrous matrimony!
All human filthiness in one crime compounded!
Unspeakable acts – I speak no more of them.
Hide me at once, for God's love, hide me away,
Away! Kill me! Drown me in the depths of the sea!
Take me! (*The CHORUS shrink from his groping hands*)
For pity, touch me, and take me away!
Touch me, and have no fear. On no man else
But on me alone is the scourge of my punishment.

CHORUS: Creon comes here. On him will now depend,
In act and counsel, the answer to your desires.
He stands our sole protector in your stead.

OEDIPUS: What can I say to him? What plea of mine
Can now have any justice in his eyes,
Whom I, as now is seen, have wronged so utterly?

Enter CREON.

CREON: Oedipus, I am not here to scoff at your fall,
Nor yet to reproach you for your past misdeeds.

My friends, remember your respect for the Lord of Life,
The Sun above us – if not for the children of men.
The unclean must not remain in the eye of day;
Nor earth nor air nor water may receive it.
Take him within; piety at least demands
That none but kinsmen should hear and see such suffering.

OEDIPUS: I only ask one thing, my gentle friend,
Whose gentleness to such a one as I am
Was more than could be hoped for. One thing only –
For God's love – for your good, not mine –

CREON: What thing,
So humbly begged?

OEDIPUS: Cast me away this instant
Out of this land, out of the sight of man.

CREON: Be sure it would have been done without delay,
But that I await instruction from the god.

OEDIPUS:
Is not his instruction already plain? The parricide,
The unclean one, was to die; and here he stands.

CREON: It was so. Yet in the present turn of events
We need more certain guidance.

OEDIPUS: For my lost life?

Will you ask the god's direction for one so damned?

CREON: Have you not found good cause to trust him?

OEDIPUS: Yes.

Then I have only this to ask, of your goodness:
The funeral rites of her that lies within,
Provide as you think fit. She is your sister,
And you will do rightly by her. As for me,
No longer let my living presence curse

This fatherland of mine, but let me go
 And live upon the mountains – and die there.
 Cithaeron! Name for ever linked with mine –
 On Mount Cithaeron, which my parents chose
 To be my deathbed, I will go and die
 Obedient to their desires. And yet I know,
 Not age, nor sickness, nor any common accident
 Can end my life; I was not snatched from death
 That once, unless to be preserved
 For some more awful destiny. Be it so.
 And the children ... Don't trouble yourself about the boys,
 Creon; they will be able to fend for themselves
 Wherever they go. But the girls, poor little mites,
 Have never known a meal without their father;
 Everything was shared between us. Take care of them,
 Creon ...

Creon ... If I could touch them once, and weep ...
 Once more ...

If you would permit it,
 Gracious and generous ...

Just touch them once, and I could think I had them
 Once more before my eyes ...

*The children, ISMENE and ANTIGONE, have already
 been led in, and stand before OEDIPUS.*

What! Do I hear my darlings sobbing?
 Has Creon had pity, and sent them to me?
 My darlings,
 Are they here?

CREON:

They are here. I had them brought to you. I knew
 How much you loved them – how you love them still.

OEDIPUS:

Heaven bless you, Creon, for this, and make your way
 Smoother than mine has been.
 Where are you, children?
 Come, feel your brother's hands. It was their work

That darkened these clear eyes – your father's eyes
 As once you knew them, though he never saw
 Nor knew what he did when he became your father.
 They cannot see you; but they weep with you.
 I think of your sorrowful life in the days to come,
 When you must face the world: the holy days,
 High days and days of state, joyless for you,
 Returning sadly home while others play.
 And when you look for marriage, will there be men,
 Will there be one man brave enough to outface
 The scandal that will cling to all my children
 And children's children? Is there a name of ill
 That is not ours? A father that killed his father;
 Despoiled his birth-bed; begetting where he was begot;
 Thus they will brand you. Where will you then find
 husbands?

There will be none, my children, for you; your days
 Can only end in fruitless maidenhood.

Menoeceus' son, you are their kinsman still;
 You are their only father; we are no more,
 Who gave them life. These lost waifs must not wander
 Homeless and husbandless; they must not see
 Such days as I shall see. Take care of them,
 So young, so poor, so lost to all but you.
 You will do it? ... Your hand to pledge your promise.
 (CREON gives his hand.) Friend!

Children, there is much that you will understand
 When you are older; you cannot bear it now.
 But in your prayers ask this: that you may live
 Not more nor less than well, and so live better
 Than did your father.

CREON: This is enough. Will you go in?

OEDIPUS: I must; against my will.

CREON: There is a measure in all things.

OEDIPUS: I have your promise, then?

CREON: What promise?

OEDIPUS: To send me away.

CREON: God will decide, not I.

OEDIPUS: No god will speak for me.

CREON: Then you will have your wish.

OEDIPUS: And your consent?

CREON: I do not speak beyond my knowledge.

OEDIPUS (*satisfied, but reluctantly*): Take me.

CREON: Go then. (*OEDIPUS moves towards the Palace, his arms still round the children*) But leave the children.

OEDIPUS: No! Never take them from me!

CREON: Command no more. Obey. Your rule is ended.

OEDIPUS is led away.

CHORUS:

Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: this was Oedipus,
Greatest of men; he held the key to the deepest mysteries;
Was envied by all his fellow-men for his great prosperity;
Behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head.
Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending,
And none can be called happy until that day when he carries
His happiness down to the grave in peace.

EXEUNT

THE LEGEND CONTINUED

In the play of KING OEDIPUS it was told how Oedipus uncovered the hideous secret of his unwitting sins. The man whom he had, in an angry moment, slain on the road that lay between Corinth and Thebes was no other than his father Laius; and the wife whom he had married upon his elevation to the throne of Thebes, and who had borne him now two sons and two daughters, was his own mother Jocasta. In his horror at this discovery, and at the self-inflicted death of Jocasta, he destroyed the sight of his own eyes, and, obedient to the curse his own lips had pronounced upon the author of his country's shame and misery, had prayed Creon, now successor to his throne, to banish him for ever from the land. This was promised him; but, in the want of any confirming word from Apollo, the execution of this sentence was long delayed. So Oedipus grew resigned to his humiliation and in some measure comforted by the shelter of his home and the succour of his growing children.

But, whether upon a revulsion of feeling among his fellow-citizens or by the express command of the god, the order for his banishment was at last pronounced, and Oedipus, now growing old, went forth into perpetual exile. Hereupon discord again rent his family; for while his daughters remained faithful to their father – Antigone, the younger, accompanying him in his wanderings, and Ismene remaining at home to watch for any happier turn of events – his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, lifted no finger to lighten his burden or stay the execution of his doom. Worse, they rebelled against the regent, Creon; not in alliance together, but in ambitious rivalry for power. While Eteocles secured the suffrages of the greater part of the citizens, Polynices betook himself to Argos, where he married the daughter of King Adrastus and set himself to plan a new onslaught on his fatherland. Meanwhile the blind wanderer and his faithful daughter came in their journeyings to the hamlet of Colonus, within a mile of the city of Athens, over which King Theseus ruled.

But even here his peace was yet to be troubled by the scheming devices of his city and family. For, having banished him, they now